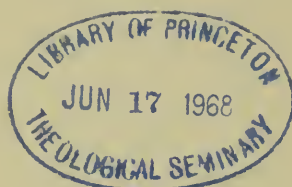


Wallace Radcliffe

The Virgin Birth

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THE VIRGIN BIRTH

A SERMON

PREACHED IN NEW YORK AVENUE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

BY

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WALLACE RADCLIFFE, DD., LLD., PASTOR

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**“He that is mighty hath done to us
great things.”—*Luke 1:49.***

The song of Mary echoes through the anthems of the centuries. That Babe of Bethlehem reveals to us the great things done for humanity. He is the most illustrious personality among men. He is the Messiah of prophesy—the Christ of history; the Saviour of the world. It is not sufficient to tell us that the story is but a pleasant myth, but a useful legend, but a graceful and gracious sentiment, but an impressive fable for the nursery. We need the larger and satisfying interpretation both of His life and birth, as well as of His death. His life is an efficient and magnificent fact, but if, coming into that life, His birth was but the birth of common humanity; if on that night at Bethlehem only a man was born, then He is on an equality with all other humanity. Born as others, He is a teacher as others, and though born with special aptitude to religion, yet after all His teaching is only a philosophy—a good human guess at the puzzle of the universe—a Socrates, a Plato, an Emerson, speaking great, grand thoughts for us and for the race. But more than this must be if there be in His presence disclosure and authoritative revelation of actual and authoritative truth.

As Christians we must know whom we follow. Are we disciples of a child of shame? Are we, and the hundreds of thousands with us, obedient only to a man—true and strong indeed, but only a man—or do we in reality listen to and follow the Son of Man who is a Son of God—in His birth, in His life, in His death, in His resurrection and ascension, a supernatural revelation in human flesh?

1. *The Narrative.*—Studying His ancestry we turn of necessity to the Scriptures. Here are the steps and sign-posts toward the great event. We begin at Eden and read the promise announced so distinctly to “the seed of the woman.” By the woman had come sin; by the woman must come redemption; and it seems

no accident, but a peculiar emphasis that is placed right in the beginning of things, in that the promised one is to be the child of the woman distinctively, and so far as the narrative is concerned, exclusively. We move down through the prophecies and we read that wonderful word in Isaiah where the virgin birth of Immanuel is so distinctly and unmistakably announced—unrecognized, indeed, by the Jews, and unaccepted of them because unrecognized and apparently unknown, but carrying in itself distinctly and emphatically the directive idea toward Him who is to be Immanuel—the God who is the divine-human Person. That is what the word means—a divine-human person is to be thus born in the coming centuries. We move down through the times of Jeremiah and Micah and listen to certain vague, indistinct, and yet no less suggestive prophecies of a strange child to be born with a nameless one for mother and of whose father there is no mention, and of a new thing on the earth, a woman who hath encompassed a man—Micah 5: 2, 3 and Jeremiah 31: 22—until we emerge into the Gospels with their positive, direct, and unmistakable record. In these the first significance is in the genealogies. These we are often disposed to waive aside as useless. We do not read them; we do not bother about them, and even wonder sometimes why the book is so lumbered up. Yet, for the honest student, very necessary and illuminating. Through the whole course of Old Testament teaching was the idea of the Messiah more and more distinct and illuminated and illuminating. The Messiah of the Hebrews was to be in the character of Christ the anointed one. The Messiah meant the Christ. Step by step the church moved toward its realization. Line by line the countenance was painted. Note by note that majestic anthem was sung through those Old Testament prophecies until we come to this New Testament history that so strikingly confirms and illustrates—The Messiah. We must be sure of Him; we must know that He is the Christ, and so we find the promise first with Eve, then with Abraham with whom and his children the covenant was made. There were many children and so we have the indication that this Messiah was to come, not only of Eve, and of Abraham, but of Isaac; there were many children of Isaac, and so we have distinctively the information that it was of his child Jacob, and

from him successively to David. There were many children; many conditions; many opportunities for mistake or perversions or wrong and misleading expectations and claims. So we have distinctly and unmistakably the genealogy traced from Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, on to the very end, until the prophesied Forerunner speaks and the babe Christ is born in Bethlehem. The genealogies are there that you and I may not mistake the ancestry; that we may know who this Messiah is; that we may have our finger upon the very word, our eye upon the very personality who is to bring to humanity the Gospel of his redemption. We may trace back the genealogy of the Jesus of Nazareth, from Bethlehem to the Garden of Eden, through Joseph to David, to Abraham, to God, and through Mary to David, to Abraham, to God, a complete genealogy, on the side of Joseph the husband of Mary, and on the side of Mary the child of David, that there may be no mistake, no clouding of title, no misapprehension. The Scriptures give us the family tree that we may recognize the veritable Messiah, the identical Christ who is to be the Saviour of Man. Men sometimes call our attention to supposed mistakes where we have in one case "Joseph the son of Jacob" and in another case "Joseph, the son of Heli." Very easily explained, the statements are consistent. "Joseph, the son of Jacob," is Joseph, the son-in-law of Heli.

The narration of the Gospels is by two very distinct and unquestioned authorities, Matthew and Luke. We have the story of the birth from the viewpoint of Joseph, in the Gospel according to Matthew, and the story from the viewpoint of Mary, in the Gospel according to Luke. In the Gospel according to Matthew you have Joseph's perplexity, and the assurance of the angel, which brought Joseph back from his perplexity to peace. And then you have in Luke, from the viewpoint of Mary, the annunciation of the angel—Mary's perplexity and modesty—and at last her cheerful and sweet submission. There we have clearly and unmistakably the story of the virgin birth of Christ, familiar to all. It is fair to say that there is one record—the Sinaitic Syrian—that does bear the expression "son of Joseph" but now that is laid aside and unregarded. It is not the version accepted by the Church of Christ; it has been examined and found defective and contradictory; it appears

that in this very same manuscript in which He is spoken of as the son of Joseph, Mary is spoken of as the virgin, and the birth spoken of as the virgin birth. A single testimony unsupported and contradictory can not be set over against the testimony of Matthew, Luke, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself, whose testimony the church accepts as records of the Word of God. These are integral parts of Scripture—these critical manuscripts have been made exact, there are no marks of interpolation; to dissect, and choose, and reject any part is to impair the harmony, consistency, and completeness of the whole record. These writers were not poets; their records are not myths nor nursery rhymes. These men were sober and honest authors. It is too late to waive aside the evangelists as story tellers or fanatics. Their records are authentic manuscripts. They claim to narrate an historical incident, written, not distant years after the event and in post-apostolic times but by apostolic writers—men of the day—who had access to the inner circle of the Holy Family, and who gave as was delivered by those who from the beginning were eye-witnesses. Matthew and Luke stand with Mark and John as equally evangelists, inspired of God, to communicate to humanity this record. The silence of Mark and John is not rightly an obstacle to faith. Their Gospels have different purposes. Mark begins his Gospel with the public ministry of Jesus. John introduces his Gospel with the pre-existence of Christ, and then he also begins with the public life of Christ. Of course, they do not mention the birth, but that fact certainly does not argue that they did not believe it. With such logic we might just as well argue that they did not believe He had been born at all, for neither of them mentions the fact of His birth. There is this significant thing to remember, that one of the authors, Luke, would be justly expected to be the depository of the great secret. It was not a public thing; it was a secret thing. It was not a matter for the public to talk about and to be projected into their controversies; it was a matter of privacy. Luke was a physician—the natural confidante in the secrets and intimacies of the Holy Family,—and it is natural and to be expected that if the record appear at all, it would be through him who was thus in intimate professional relationships and to whom this was not so much a

wonder as a mysterious reality. The silences are rather confirmatory.

We are told that not only are these two Gospels—Mark and John—silent, but that there is such silence throughout the following New Testament. Well, how often would you have it mentioned? Must we believe a thing only after it has been repeated and re-repeated? Must we wait and wait and wait again until the story is told over and over and over again, no matter what may be the fact presented, nor how demanding the authority of the witness. Once is enough when the Word of God speaks.

Especially is the silence of Paul an ineffectual argument. This birth was not in the scheme of his work. He did not deal with the details of the life of Christ. His great thought was the Person—the Cross—the Resurrection of Christ; to the elaboration and emphasis of these great facts he gave himself, and the very fact that he does not mention the birth, instead of contradicting seems to confirm it. Luke and Paul were companions. It is altogether likely—it is absolutely certain, I should think—that with such a profound fact in his possession, the intimacies of their companionship would compel the narration by Luke to Paul, and we can read his epistles, seeing in the background the belief, not in the incarnation only, but in the virgin birth of Christ and have sympathy with the old fathers who believed that Paul directed Luke to the writing of his Gospel, as Peter directed Mark to the writing of his. The silence of the Scriptures, far from suggesting our unbelief, rather confirms the conviction that it was accepted by them as a fact, and having another scheme and another phase of the divine commission to present, they wrote upon the basis of that record and spoke their individual message. And certainly this historic fact has been accepted. The church through all the intervening years—for nineteen hundred years—has lived its life of faith in the virgin birth of Christ. There have been, here and there, contradictions. A few Christians, coming into discipleship from the Greeks, denied it; a few, a very few, of the Jewish Christians antagonized it. And now again in the progress of the years it is in debate; but the great mass of the Christian church has accepted the historic announcement of

Matthew and Luke, as a veritable fact, and all creeds and confessions narrate it, from the Apostles' Creed to the most elaborate confessions; the Holy Catholic Church proclaims to the world and to God with its mighty and overwhelming voice "I believe in Jesus Christ, conceived of the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary."

The testimony is a testimony of scholarship, of accepted and tried integrity, of accumulated and commanding numbers which confirm and reiterates the large, tremendous, unimpeachable belief of the Church of Christ.

2. *Its Reasonableness.*—Some questions are raised whose consideration is not worth while. There are indecent suggestions, sinful, vulgar, blasphemous, that are not to be heard except with indignation and scorn. But there are honest doubters who insist that of course it is impossible. Well, that depends. If you do not believe in miracles, of course to you it is impossible. If you do not believe in anything but natural law, of course to you the virgin birth is not a possibility. If everything must be measured by the exactness of human reason and human law, then of course we may dismiss this historic incident as fable. But Christianity is supernatural and if we dismiss the miracle we dismiss Christianity, and we waive aside records that are authentic, confirmed in their integrity, and which confirm to us the history of a miracle. If there is to be in your idea of the birth nothing but naturalism, of course this record is not to be accepted. But we believe in the miracle. We believe that the common birth is very largely a miracle, and certainly in the matter of the new birth of the spirit, we not only believe and welcome but we accept as necessary the direct interposition of God. A sinless man is as much a miracle in the moral world as a virgin birth is in the physical world. Christianity is necessarily supernatural. Incarnation of the pre-existent Son implies a miracle in human origin. And this miracle must of necessity have a physical as well as spiritual side.

And this is not, as many suppose, a miracle, or a supernatural act, above others. I can believe as readily in this as I believe in the resurrection. You believe in the resurrection. You believe in regeneration, which is a miracle of the Holy Spirit—and in

sanctification. And the whole experience, from the beginning to the end of the spiritual life, is a miracle of the Spirit of God. And through His whole life, Christ's life was glorified, made splendid and impressive by interpositions with intrusions upon the law of nature. His great incidents—His death, His resurrection, His ascension, are no less miracles than this birth of the Christ child at Bethlehem.

I am not bothered, and the Christian man is not to be bothered, with the fact that we are confronting a miracle. Of course it is a miracle, and if we are not to accept the possibility of the supernatural, we are in the very act of belittling our religion, we virtually reject the basic fact and influence in Christianity and repudiate His Gospel of redemption. All miracles are equally easy to Omnipotence. The Virgin Birth is not a unique exception. The fact is not as unscientific and impossible as we are sometimes told. Huxley himself tells us that the very incident essentially is an every-day occurrence in modern biology.

We are told that it is unhistoric, and are pointed to heathen legends and myths and asked to believe that the whole story has its origin either from Egyptian or Pagan suggestion. They tell us, for instance, that the idea existed in Babylon, and that our story is but a projection into Christianity of an old Babylonian myth—the very same men forgetting that in the early part of their argument they were trying to teach us that this story of the virgin birth was not known by the apostles or by the early church but was a subsequent growth of the years of the Christian era. They had better fix up their tenses before they begin to talk. Certainly it is not of Jewish growth, for the Jews themselves failed to see their Messiah in the prophesied Immanuel who was to be born in Bethlehem of the virgin. And certainly it could not have been transmitted from those who had no faith, and no mention of such a miracle. I fail to see the analogies claimed in Pagan mythology. And we are taught sometimes that it is an invention read back into the record—in these days particularly of destructive criticism. We are told with great elaboration that the Gospel of Mark is the first of the Gospels, and that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark, and that Mark himself wrote his Gospel partly of personal knowledge.

There are things on which Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree; there are matters on which two of them agree; there are matters of which Mark only knows—or that there were pre-existent sources, hypothetical manuscripts called “Logia” and “U-Mark,” and “Q” from which he borrowed. We get very elaborate in our scholarship when we undertake to destroy the Bible, you know. Mark was using these, and out of all these, in building up his Gospel, he never found or mentioned the virgin birth, but Matthew and Luke simply appropriated from him their historic narratives and then, out of the superstition on the part of some, out of the pious wish on the part of others, out of an ignorant puzzle on the part of others—intruded the virgin birth into their Gospel. That story needs only to be told, to be disregarded.

We are told again that it is unnecessary; that we build up a great piece of history here that is not needful for the mission of Christ; that He was the child of Mary and of Joseph, to whom there came the large endowment of an indwelling of the spirit of God by which He became thus the Almighty teacher of the Gospel of salvation. Such a theory forgets one or two things. It forgets, first, that any such inflowing of the spirit of God can not produce a sinless man. The child of Adam, by ordinary generation, generation after generation, shares in the fall in the sinful nature. It is not possible for the stream to rise higher than its fountain, that it shall not carry with itself the qualities of that fountain. As one of Adam’s race He would have shared in Adam’s sin and doom. If Christ is the son of a man and a woman, then of necessity He is only a son of man and He carries in Himself the faults, the weaknesses, something of the sin of that humanity, and needs for Himself, somewhere, a redemption. With all reverence be it spoken, God himself can not create a divine being, and it is not possible by any endowment of the spirit by any large and overwhelming benediction of the spirit of God, for any man to be made divine—human. But bear in mind the name—Immanuel—whose very meaning is literally, the divine-human Person.

And not only so, but that philosophy forgets that other fact—in that inn at Bethlehem was not the beginning of Christ. His birth was not His origin, His beginning was not in that human

birth. In the beginning was the Word. The Word already existed—what happens is a pre-existent personality being introduced into a new order of being—that is all there is—there is not here the creation of a personality; there is the introduction of this pre-existent person coming out of that larger society in which He has been, into this other condition of our earthly human life. So somehow or other there must be a power of almightiness which shall produce the form in which this personality may exist for that earthly mission.

This controversy is not merely academic, not merely a formula for scholastic dispute. It is not a question of a few isolated Scripture texts. It is the test, not of scholarship, but of principle. It is an essential article of the Christian faith; it is an essential fact; and carries in itself an essential doctrine; it has been accepted as history from authentic records; it has been held for more than 1,900 years in the hearts of the disciples and written into the creeds and confessions of the church of Christ. If this doctrine is false the whole Christian faith breaks down. If true, the whole story of Jesus is unassailable. It carries in itself essential truth and essential life for you and me; to remove it is to remove one of the very foundation stones of the religion of Christ.

If you deny this virgin birth, you affect the faithfulness of the word of God. That is the first thing to bear in mind. It is here written, and it is bound up with the whole history and mission of Jesus Christ.

We can not accept here and there some statement that pleases us, some doctrine that commends itself, some biography that teaches or charms, and then throw aside all the rest of the word of God. He that adds and he that takes from, have the pronouncement of an eternal curse. It is part of the word of God not only, but it is particularly essential to the authenticity of the life and mission of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament picture, the face of the Messiah is constantly emerging through word and type and prophesy defining more clearly the face of Christ. In the New Testament picture are His personality and work still more defined and transfigured. That Word means nothing to you and me unless it brings to us the authoritative, authentic, and effective life of Christ. The one gives us the prophetic

Messiah, the other the historic Jesus, for our honor, belief, and hope. When I cut out of Luke and out of Matthew this record of the virgin birth, when I cut out of Isaiah, the promise of Immanuel, and when I go back to Eden and silence the promise that the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent, I am dishonoring the word of God; I am assailing His revelation; I am seeking to add to or take from that word to which He has given the final commendation and message.

But this doctrine yields to us not only His message but His person. It conserves the true doctrine of the Person of Christ. Christ was promised to us as the divine-human Person. He comes to us as Immanuel, as the man who bears in Himself all divine perfections, all human attributes. He is to us the divine side of man, as He is also the human side of God. He is bearing to us this wondrous personality by which we are to know God, by which, among us, God, the divine-human person, may dwell with us. This is impossible if His parentage is only of one kind, or if He is only empowered or inspired by the Holy Spirit. That way lies Unitarianism. You could not have such a personality if He was the human son of a human father and a human mother. There must be somewhere the miracle that shall produce the Incarnate, that shall to this humanity give, not appearances, not visions, not occasional words, not intermittent experiences, but transfiguration. In this humanity must abide the presence and power of God.

That is the reason why the church of Christ to-day emphasizes this doctrine. There is a quiet result of indifference and ease that is encouraging in the common conviction a scepticism and doubt—a relaxing sense of God in Christ, which is often insensibly but no less certainly a movement toward the secularizing of the Bible and the undeifying of Christ.

Men who are antagonizing the supernatural birth of Christ, are minimizing His deity. It is an attack that will take many jewels from the crown of Christ. It will by and by, but very surely, bring us to the announcement of a creed which will eliminate the incarnate God and in place of Immanuel will exalt only The Perfect Man.

This doctrine of the virgin Birth also holds necessarily the truth of the sinlessness of Christ. Because His human nature has

miraculous origin it therefore is sinless. How can we explain otherwise the Holy One of God? It belongs to man to sin. Every man is a sinner. But Christ comes as the second Adam, introducing in Himself a new creation of our humanity, and there must be in that true body and reasonable soul no guilt nor stain of sin; He must be to us the Holy One of God. He can come only as the son of God; and thus He proclaims Himself. He never speaks of Himself as the son of Joseph. He never speaks of Himself as a son of man. He never confesses Himself the son of Mary. His birth is not the origin of His personality, and its entrance into the conditions of our human life, whilst recognizing Mary as His mother and revealing in Himself the attributes of His humanity, everywhere and at all times He proclaims Himself the Son of God. Bear in mind always the wording of your creed. It is not only that He is born of the Virgin Mary, but "conceived of the Holy Ghost"; that the Holy Spirit comes not with external power, but with the internal power—the indwelling power of God. His nature and mission required a special miracle differing from the common endowment of the Spirit.

And over against the idea that Christ is without paternity—this is the large and true thing, that He has on the side of humanity, Mary, the mother—but He is the Son of God. Mary was His mother and God was His father. So we have divinity and humanity with the child Christ, presented to the race. Everywhere He is called the Son of God. Everywhere He proclaimed, not Joseph, but God as His father. Everywhere He emphasized the divine fatherhood. Everywhere He claims to come from the Father; to go to the Father. So there is not only the divinity but the sonship of Jesus Christ that carries in itself a large and comforting and inspiring idea of His friendship for redeemed humanity, so that we say, one to another, "Not only are we the children of the Highest—now are we the sons of God."

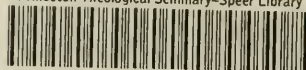
This doctrine impressively and essentially holds the doctrine of His salvation. Bear in mind the emphasis of the truth. Certainly we are not as we are often told, "merely splitting hairs." We are not having a scholastic dispute, we are advocating truth for Christian redemption. When we hold to this doctrine we are holding first to the faithfulness of the word of God; second, to

His personaltiy—the divine-human; third, to his sinlessness, and fourth, to His salvation. He is the Saviour. He is the Messiah, and the Messiah through all the years is revealed as one who was to be born of a virgin. He is the Christ, and the Christ was thus born of a virgin. He is the Saviour and the Saviour of the world was to be thus born of a virgin. Everywhere, through our Scripture, that great fact is presented, and if it be not true that Christ was thus born; if it be not true as Matthew and Luke narrate, no matter what our experience is, what our doubts, what our logic; if it be not true that this Christ, prophesied throughout all the years, carried to us through this magnificent ancestry, was born in Bethlehem, of Mary, the betrothed of Joseph—then humanity is hopeless; there is no Gospel to teach; there is no Messiah to be revealed; there is no Christ to preach; there is no word to utter—of love and redemption, of God and Salvation. But over against all doubt and scepticism we come to this manger-cradle and we find Immanuel. In this son of Mary we read the promise of the Messiah; in this helpless Babe we feel the very presence of the Spirit of God, and in this Child of the Virgin we hail the Son of Redemption.

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The virgin birth; a sermon preached in

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